

Culture

Sharjah exhibition tells stories of the 20th century

N.P. Krishna Kumar

Dubai

Looking at key social, cultural and intellectual developments of the 20th century through art can reveal the human truths that go beyond culture and geography.

The Short Century, an exhibition of modern Arab art from the last century organised by Barjeel Art Foundation at the Sharjah Art Museum, is just such a *tour de force* in curatorial presentation.

Because of the diversity and styles of more than 100 works on display from artists across the Arab world, the exhibition offers an account of the sweep of history that the show seeks to uncover.

The artists include Egyptian painters Mahmoud Said and Seif Wanly, Egyptian modernists Abdel Hadi el-Gazzar and Inji Efflatoun, Iraqi modernists Dia Azzawi and Shakir Hassan al-Said and Lebanese abstractionists Saliba Douaihy and Saloua Raouda Choucair.

“The Short Century is just such a *tour de force* in curatorial presentation.”

“One of the main objectives of the Barjeel Art Foundation is to raise awareness of the rich history of Arab art internationally and at home, so we are delighted that an exhibition of this scope is taking place at the Sharjah Art Museum,” said Sultan Souad al-Qassemi, founder of the Barjeel Art Foundation.

“The show presents a major statement on the history of modern Arab art. The curators have been able to draw out a set of themes

that tell the stories of the 20th century.”

Curators Suheyla Takesh and Karim Sultan underline the challenges they faced in presenting a comprehensive survey in a non-chronological manner.

“The exhibition is scheduled to remain on display until December 24th.”

“We wanted to avoid an exhibition that simply showed a survey of works by Arab artists and went decade by decade, say from the 1910s, the 1920s and so on,” Takesh said. “Instead, this was intended as a way of looking into important social, cultural and intellectual developments in the 20th century through art, primarily painting.”

The curators said they were inspired by the work of historian Eric Hobsbawm, who wrote *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century*, in which he saw the century enclosed between the first world war and the fall of the Soviet Union.

“In our region there were parallel events after which things were irreparably different: the fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1920 (and perhaps the parallel phenomenon of the Sykes-Picot agreement, which led to the development of modern borders) and the first Gulf War of 1990-91,” Sultan said.

This framework gave the curators the opportunity to present a history of Arab art on a backdrop of rapidly and radically changing societies in which a diverse set of artists worked to develop their own voices and styles.

The works were classified into various sections and under different themes from the larger historical framework of *The Short Century* and the massive upheavals it entailed, including urbanisation and



Curator Suheyla Takesh with *The Protector of Life* by Hamed Ewais, at *The Short Century* exhibit in Sharjah. (Photograph by Capital D Studio)

technological development, the village and the city, nationalism and its effects, language and identity.

As counterpoint alongside these themes are works of *tajreed*, the abstract art trends in the Arab world during the modern period, and *hurufiyya*, a style that emerged in the late 1940s in which single Arabic letters, or *harf*, are transformed into pictures. It became widely used in the Middle East, leading to the popularity of modern calligraphy in Arab art.

“Artists throughout the 20th century were well connected with developments in Europe or the Americas but also delved deep into the constructed histories of then-new nation states to create voices that sought to be authentic, both to themselves as well as to their places of origin,” Sultan said.

“The subject matter they represented – whether highly political works reflecting social reality or introspective, experimental abstraction – determined the themes and sections of the show. We began with the works and with a historical sensibility as a backdrop.”

Takesh said: “Many works stand out highlighting different eras, regions and styles.”

“As far as the political and social peak, the work by Hamed Ewais, *The Protector of Life* (1967-68), painted after Egypt’s defeat in the 1967 war, is a complex work that shows both a sense of injured pride but an underlying deep sense of anxiety around the collapse of the Arab nationalist project at the time,” she said.

“An interesting contrast to such an overtly political work emerges

in the section that shows works by both forward-thinking Lebanese artist Saloua Raouda Choucair and experimental Iraqi artist Shakir Hassan al-Said – both pioneers with their respective styles,” Sultan said.

“The works, presented in opposition to one another, show how uniquely expressive abstract works can allow for deep and meaningful introspection for both the artist and the viewer and engagement with diverse sets of influences including architecture, spirituality and the city.”

The exhibition is scheduled to remain on display until December 24th.

N.P. Krishna Kumar is a Dubai-based contributor to The Arab Weekly.

Arab science fiction explored at London screening

Dunia El-Zobaidi

London

Contrasting with Hollywood’s *Star Wars*, Arab visual artists have used science fiction to depict reality and address contemporary urgencies surrounding identity, conflict and the future, in *Halcyon: New Short Films*, which explored definitions of science fiction in Arab writing and film.

The event, curated by Rachel Dedman and presented in London’s Mosaic Rooms, featured four films by artists from or based in the Palestinian territories, Lebanon and Egypt.

In *The Pessoptimist*, Mirna Bamieh’s protagonist is abducted by aliens to mirror the miseries and horror of the occupation of the Palestinian territories.

In *Nation Estate*, Larissa Sansour imagined a futuristic solution to Palestinian statehood – an enormous high-rise building with the entire Palestinian population living inside.

“The screening featured four films by artists from or based in the Palestinian territories, Lebanon and Egypt.”

Tom Bodaert’s *pepsi, cola, water?* shows Afro-American jazz pioneer, poet and philosopher Sun Ra and his fascination with outer space and ancient Egypt. He describes the disenchantment felt from Ra’s 1971 concert in Giza.

In *Let There Be Light*, Lea Najjar explores the effects of artificial light on society, its ability to affect and nurture the body and its use in a techno-commercial context to con-



Larissa Sansour *Nation Estate* 2012

control the psychological wellbeing of workers.

Dedman said she wanted to discuss traditional definitions of science fiction in writing and film and how sci-fi might disrupt established narratives, present alternative views of the self and offer subtle negotiations of the future.

As stated in Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, the idea of Arabs seen as the *other* is shown in both negative and positive ways in the films. Palestinians are seen as *others* by Israelis and Ancient Egypt is shown as a positive *other* as an Afro-American is fascinated by Egypt’s history.

“Sci-fi is a way of making the *other* and with the Middle East especially, they are shown as the *other*,” Dedman said, arguing that science fiction may give artists and writers authority that *other* genres may not.

“Bogaert is aware somehow of

the authority that science fiction has. He writes the text of the film in a very authoritative way. Even in its tone, it doesn’t feel it is self-authoritative.

“He creates images but intervenes in them as well. Science fiction has a legitimacy to play with audiences to shape or subvert expectations. Tom is doing this with history and myth-making that exists in the imagination particularly around Egypt and right across the region,” Dedman added.

Science fiction can be used mentally to escape conflict, the biggest issue faced by the Middle East, Dedman contended. “When the world around feels unbearable, the imagination can create a sub-reality, a place to take refuge, to escape reality and to create alternative futures,” she said.

Although there is interest in sci-

ence fiction in the Arab world, few opportunities are presented to explore the subject mainly because of poor funding.

“Writing about sci-fi is much cheaper than creating films,” Dedman said. “People don’t easily want to fund sci-fi films. People like the idea of Middle-Eastern science fiction but they think they are not ready for it. This is not true because there are histories and legacies of science fiction in the Arab world since the 12th and 13th centuries such as Ibn al-Nafis or *One Thousand and One Nights*.”

Speaking about the vital use of language and translation in the genre, she said: “An incidental pun or slippage in language may be applicable to all kinds of translations as a process but when we think about science fiction, especially in and around Arabic, there is always this

politics of translation that comes up again and again as something very urgent.

“There are so many scientific words that come originally from Arabic but are not really used in a vernacular sense anymore. Finding a new language or inventing things within a language is one of the really exciting elements of science fiction and in particular in Arabic where you don’t necessarily have science fiction literature and film,” Dedman added.

Alongside the fact that Middle Eastern landscape has often been the backdrop of sci-fi films, high-rise buildings in the Gulf countries are also popular for fictional movies such as *Mission: Impossible - Ghost Protocol*.

With the rapid development of the Gulf, artists have used science fiction to assess the changes the region has made at a vertiginous speed but Dedman argues that although Arab futurism could open more doors, it is hard to maintain.

“The Gulf futurism movement is very popular at the moment in the work of GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) (artists). They use science fiction to twist, turn back and reflect upon a technological context. Arab futurism may be something broader but it is very difficult to constitute.”

Dedman said “halcyon” has many definitions. Ancient writers say it is a mythical bird to breed in a nest floating at sea at the winter peak, alluring the wind and waves to be calm. It is also a tropical Asian and African kingfisher with bright-colored feathers.

“Halcyon days are nostalgic happy days of a past that related to optimism and utopianism,” she said. “The word for me sounded chemical, like an element which seemed to fit for this project.”

Dunia El-Zobaidi is a regular Arab Weekly contributor in London.